

Shingles

What is shingles?

Shingles, also known as herpes zoster, is a localized infection due to the same virus that causes chickenpox. It occurs only in people who have had chickenpox. After a chickenpox infection, the virus does not leave the body, but hides along the pathways of the nerves of the skin. During a shingles outbreak, the virus reactivates and causes the rash to occur.

Who gets shingles?

Anyone who has had chickenpox in the past can get shingles. In fact, 1 out of every 3 people will develop shingles. It occurs most often in older adults, but younger people with weak immune systems are also at risk.

How is shingles spread?

A person must have already had chickenpox in the past to develop shingles. Contact with a person with shingles does not cause another person's dormant virus to reactivate. However, the virus from a patient with shingles may cause chickenpox in someone who has not had chickenpox.

The virus is spread through direct contact with the fluid from the rash. It can also be spread by contact with articles, such as clothing or towels, which have been in contact with the blisters. A person is only contagious when the shingles rash is present. Once the rash has developed crusts, the person is no longer contagious.

What are the symptoms of shingles?

The first symptoms are often a tingling feeling on the skin, itchiness, or a stabbing pain. Also, fever, chills, fatigue, and upset stomach may occur 3 to 4 days before the rash. A red rash appears, most often on the chest and waist area, and spreads in a line-like pattern. About 1 to 2 days later, the rash changes to fluid-filled blisters that dry and scab in about 7 to 10 days. Often there is severe pain in the rash area due to the inflammation of the nerves. The rash and pain usually disappear within 2 to 4 weeks.

What is the treatment for shingles?

Antiviral drugs may be prescribed, especially for people with suppressed immune systems. For these antiviral drugs to be effective, they must be started as soon as possible after the rash appears. Also, pain-relieving medications or anti-itching cream may be ordered. Most cases of shingles resolve on their own without specific treatment.

Are there complications from shingles?

Possible complications include pain at the site of the rash that may persist for months or years or scarring. People with immune problems may have repeated cases of shingles. Anyone with shingles on the upper half of their face, no matter how mild, should seek

medical care at once. There is some risk that the virus could cause damage to the eye resulting in blindness, ear damage, or other problems with the brain.

How can shingles be prevented?

A vaccine is now available for adults over the age of 60 years. Vaccination reduces the risk of developing shingles by 51% and reduces the risk of chronic pain due to shingles by 67%. This vaccine is recommended for everyone over the age of 60, regardless if they had chickenpox or not in their lifetime. People with weakened immune systems and pregnant women should not receive this vaccine.

Children should be vaccinated against chickenpox to prevent development of shingles later in life.

How do I get more information on shingles?

Calhoun County Public Health Department
Phone: (269) 969-6383

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
Web Site: <http://www.cdc.gov/shingles/index.html>

Shingles
Updated 4/25/12

This fact sheet is meant to provide general health information and is not intended to be medical advice or otherwise take the place of your doctor's orders or to diagnose your specific health problems. Check with your doctor if you have any questions or concerns about your health.

Calhoun County Public Health Department

190 E. Michigan Avenue, Suite A100
Battle Creek, Michigan 49014
Tel: (269) 969-6383
Fax: (269) 969-6488